THE GUARDIANSHIP PROCEEDINGS OF ZEPHANIAH STEELMAN JR.

A Court of Chancery Commission *de Lunatico Inquiendo*

New Jersey • 1837

Historical Introduction
Summary of Proceedings
Complete Transcription

from the *Minutes of the Atlantic County Orphans Court*, Volume A (1837–1860)

Prepared by Brian Griffis
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Introduction

The following pages contain a complete transcription of the proceedings arising from a Commission *de Lunatico Inquirendo* issued by the New Jersey Court of Chancery in 1837 to determine the legal competency of Zephaniah Steelman Jr. of Egg Harbor Township, Atlantic County, New Jersey. The proceedings conclude with the appointment of a guardian by the Atlantic County Orphans Court after the Court of Chancery found Zephaniah incapable of managing himself and his affairs.

I originally transcribed the proceedings during research for a forthcoming history of one branch of the Steelman family. While the transcription and the summary I drew from it were created for my own use, I chose to incorporate them into this document in order to freely share the work with other researchers. The original proceedings comprise more than 3,800 words of legal language recorded in nineteenth-century manuscript handwriting. Researchers seeking a general understanding of the proceedings may rely solely on the summary, while those wishing to examine

every detail may consult the complete transcription.

The original handwritten manuscript, as recorded in *Minutes of the Atlantic County Orphans Court*, Volume A (1837–1860), was carefully transcribed line by line. Original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammatical usage have generally been retained. No material changes have been made to the text.

Readers should be aware that the proceedings employ legal and medical terminology common to the nineteenth century, including such words as *lunatic* and *idiot*. These terms reflected the legal classifications of the period and are reproduced here exactly as they appear in the historical record. They are presented solely for historical accuracy and should be understood within their original legal context.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Following the deaths of Zephaniah Steelman Sr. in 1836 and his widow, Sybilla, in the spring of 1837, their son, Zephaniah Steelman Jr., inherited a share of the family estate. Concerned that his brother had long been incapable of managing either himself or his property, Peter C. Steelman petitioned the New Jersey Court of Chancery on July 7, 1837 for the issuance of a *commission de lunatico inquirendo*, a legal inquiry to determine Zephaniah's mental competency and whether a guardian should be appointed to protect his person and estate.

In support of the petition, affidavits were submitted by David Frambes and Isabella Jeffryes,[1] two longtime acquaintances of the Steelman family. Frambes testified that he had known Zephaniah for approximately thirty

[1] These surnames were consistently spelled Frambus and Jeffrys in the minutes; they are in reference to David Frambes (1790–1867) and Isabella Jeffryes (nee Smith; 1799–1865). David's relation to the family is that in 1816, his father, Nicholas Frambes, married Peter C. Steelman's widowed mother-in-law, Alice Scull. Isabella was the wife of John W. Jeffryes, Jr. (1789–1834), who was a second cousin to Zephaniah Jr. and Peter C. Steelman, and also the brother-in-law of Peter C. Steelman.

years and that, following the deaths of his parents, Zephaniah had come to live in his household. He described Zephaniah as physically strong and capable of performing simple farm labor under close supervision, but entirely unable to understand the value of money, conduct business, or carry on a coherent conversation. In Frambes's opinion, Zephaniah had been intellectually disabled since childhood and would quickly squander his inheritance if left to manage it himself.

Isabella Jeffryes, who was well acquainted with Zephaniah for at least twenty years, and had formerly worked in the Steelman household, offered similar testimony. She stated that he possessed no understanding of money or numbers, required constant supervision, and lacked the mental capacity to care for himself or manage his affairs. She also recalled a conversation with Zephaniah's mother, Sybilla, shortly before her death, during which Sybilla expressed deep concern for her son's future and her hope that David Frambes would take him into his home and care for him after her death. Frambes had subsequently done so.

On 11 July 1837, Chancellor Philemon Dickerson ordered that a commission issue to inquire into Zephaniah's competency. Commissioners Richard W. Howell, Mahlon D. Canfield, and Jonathan Pitney were appointed to conduct the inquiry, and a jury of twenty-four Atlantic County men was summoned to hear the evidence. This jury was comprised mainly of family members, friends, and neighbors. Among the jurors were Zephaniah's brothers Peter and Daniel Steelman and his brother-in-law Japhet Townsend.[2]

Meeting at the house of William Westcoat in Hamilton Township on July 25, 1837, the jury unanimously found that Zephaniah Steelman was "a lunatic and of unsound mind," that he "did not enjoy lucid intervals," and that he had remained in that condition from infancy. The jurors concluded that they knew

[2] The complete jury included: Joseph Scull, Wesley Scull, Jacob Somers, David Campbell, Daniel Champion, Peter Steelman, Elisha E Hudson, Jeremiah Steelman, John Collins, Joshua Parwood, Constantine Somers, Peter Risley, Joseph Irelan, Daniel Steelman, Richard L Somers, Lamuel L Reed, Joseph Thompson, Japhet Townsend, Clark T Williams, Sheaman Clark, Richard Scull, Razine Steelmen, Hezekiah Shaw, and J P Browning, Sheriff.

of no cause for his condition "unless by the visitation of God." They further found that he was incapable of governing either himself or his estate.

The jury also inventoried Zephaniah's property. They found that he owned an undivided one-tenth interest in a tract of approximately 150 acres in Egg Harbor Township, together with $1.10 due from the estate of James Steelman; $86.90 due from the estate of his mother, Sybilla Steelman; $200 on deposit in the State Bank at Camden (likely from the estate of his father); and personal property consisting of a bed, bedding, and a chest valued at about $30. They found that he had not yet alienated any of his property, and they further reported that he owed no debts.

As part of the inquisition, the jury identified Zephaniah's surviving brothers and sisters and listed their approximate ages, including: Peter C. (51), James (41), Daniel (37), Jesse (36), Lerner (35), and Washington Steelman (32), Hester

Townsend (48), Lottie Townsend (43), and Sarah Adams (30).[3]

On 15 September 1837, Chancellor Dickerson confirmed the jury's findings and ordered the proceedings transmitted to the Atlantic County Orphans Court. At its October Term, on 16 October 1837, the Orphans Court appointed David Frambes guardian of both Zephaniah's person and estate, conditioned upon his posting a bond in the amount of $1,000 with approved sureties.

[3] Although some of the names are incomplete or misspelled, and some of the ages are incorrect, this list constitutes one of the most valuable genealogical portions of the proceedings. From oldest to youngest, the ten children of Zephaniah and Sybilla (Albertson) Steelman are: Peter C. Steelman (b.~1786), Hester "Hettie" Steelman (Mrs. Japhet Townsend, b. 1789), James Steelman (b.~1791), Zephaniah Steelman Jr. (b. 1792), Charlotte "Lottie" Steelman (Mrs. James Townsend, b.~1794), Jesse Steelman (b 1797), Daniel Steelman (b.~1800), Larner Steelman (b. 1803), George Washington Steelman (b.~1807), Sarah Steelman (Mrs. Reuben Adams, b.~1807).

Transcription of the Proceedings

Transcribed by Brian Griffis, July 2026

The following transcript from the Court of Chancery of this state having been filed in the surrogates office was approved by this Court and ordered to be recorded.

The petition of Peter C. Steelman of the County of Atlantic and state of New Jersey respectfully showeth that Zephaniah Steelman of the township of Egg Harbor in the county and state aforesaid who is the brother of your petitioner now is and for some considerable time past, has been so far deprived of his reason and understanding that he is altogether unfit and unable to govern himself or to manage his affairs, as by the affidavit hereunto annexed appears. Your petitioner therefore prays that a commission de lunatico inquirendo may issue out of this Honorable Court to enquire of the lunacy or idiocy of the said Zephaniah Steelman directed to such persons as your Excellency shall think fit – and your petitioner will ever pray.

Dated 7 1837

In the same case
Affidavits
Filed July 11, 1837

State of New Jersey. Personally appeared before me the subscribers one of the masters of the court of chancery of the State of New Jersey, David Frambus who being duly sworn according to law doth depose and say – I reside in the township of Egg Harbor in the County of Atlantic in this state and have resided there from my childhood up to this time. I am well acquainted with Zephaniah Steelman named in the foregoing petition, and have known him intimately for at least thirty years. The said Zephaniah Steelman is at this time about forty-five years of age. He has resided within two miles of my house for thirty years past – and for the last two or three months has lived in my family. The said Zephaniah Steelman resided with his father until the death of the latter, which occurred about fifteen months ago. Since then he lived with his mother until her death in March last. By the death of his father the said Zephaniah Steelman became entitled to real and personal property to the amount of

about five hundred dollars, that the said Zephaniah Steelman has from his childhood been so far deprived and destitute of reason as to be entirely unfit and unable to transact business or to manage his affairs: that he has no proper or just idea of the value of money or other property and is unable to distinguish the difference between a dollar and half a dollar coin or to distinguish one coin from another. That in consequences of this destitution of reason and understanding, the father of the said Zephaniah never suffered him to make any bargain or purchases, or to attempt to transact business of any kind. That the said Zephaniah is entirely unable to hold any connected conversation upon any subject – but in talking wanders from subject to subject, and from one matter to another having not the slightest connection or relationship with each other. It is my candid opinion and belief that should he get the control of the property above mentioned he would squander it away upon the most trifling objects in a very short time, and he himself become a charge upon the County. That in my opinion the said Zephaniah Steelman is a complete idiot and in this

opinion, everyone who knows him joins me. The said Zephaniah Steelman is a strong able-bodied hearty man and I keep him at such work as he can attend to, but he requires the same looking after that a child would. I do not and never will have pretended to trust with my horses or team as I do not consider him capable of managing horses. I do consider it absolutely necessary that some suitable person should be appointed to take charge of his person and property, as he is not capable of taking of either himself.

Subscribed and sworn to this seventh day of July A D 1837 before me, Richard W Howell Master in Chancery of New Jersey.

David Frambus

New Jersey. Personally appeared before me the subscribers one of the masters of the Court of Chancery of the State of New Jersey Isabella Jeffry is who alleging herself to be conscientiously scrupulous of taking an oath being duly affirmed according to law, or her solemn affirmation saith and have resided in the township of Egg Harbor in the county now Atlantic, formerly Gloucester from the age of seven years up to the present time and still resides there. I am the widow of the late John Jeffrys deceased. I was thirty-seven years old on the thirteenth day of last March. I am acquainted with Zephaniah Steelman mentioned in the foregoing petition of Peter C. Steelman and have been acquainted with him for at least twenty years past. I worked in his father's house as a hired girl for some time before I was married – and I lived within a half-mile of his father's house after I was married. For about ten years, during at which time the said Zephaniah Steelman resided with his father – and I was in the habit of seeing him almost daily. He lived in his father's house until after the death of his father which happened about fourteen or fifteen months ago, after

which he continued to live with his mother in the same house until after her death this last spring. He now lives with Mr. David Frambus in the same neighborhood. I now live about three miles from Mr. David Frambus's house. I have frequently seen the said Zephaniah Steelman within the last three months. So long as I have known the said Zephaniah Steelman, he has never been possessed of the ordinary reason and understanding of his fellow creatures. He has no knowledge of money or the value of money, nor do I believe he knows one piece of money from another. I have often seen him when he happened to have money playing with it and showing it – just as a little child would do – without possessing the slightest knowledge of the different pieces or their names; and he was just as likely to call a twenty-five cent piece a dollar or half a dollar, as by its right name. I do not believe him able to count his money or anything else. I believe he has insufficient capacity to do it. In respect to mind, I think him a mere infant – he can work if anyone will plan it out for him and set him at it and attend to him while he is at it. I mean the most ordinary work about a farm but

I do not think him capable of driving a team, ploughing or narrowing with hoes at all. I think he must be as much as forty-five years of age at this time. I believe the said Zephaniah Steelman so destitute of reason and understanding as to be entirely incapable of taking care of himself, or of managing his business, and that he requires someone to take care of him and of his affairs. I know that by the death of his father, he has become entitled to some little property and I believe if it should get into his actual possession, it would soon be all wasted and squandered as he has no more knowledge of the use or value of it than a child. In mind, I consider him a mere idiot – and that is the opinion I believe of all who know him. His conversation is childish and unconnected. He will commence talking about one thing and break off in the middle of it and make to some other subject, and there wanders from subject (PAGE 10): to subject – appearing to forget what he began to talk about. Mrs. Sybilla Steelman, the mother of Zephaniah a short time previous to her death conversed with me a good deal about the said Zephaniah and seemed very anxious about what was to become of him after

her death, she then being in very bad health. She said he was not capable of taking care of himself at all and expressed a wish that Mr. David Frambus would take him to his house and take care of him which Mr. Frambus since her death has done.

Subscribed and affirmed to this seventh day of July A D 1837 before me, Richard W Howell, Master of Chancery.

Isabella Jeffrys (her mark)

In same case
Order for commissioner
Filed July 11, 1837

Upon receiving the petition of Peter C. Steelman and the affidavits of David Frambus and Isabella Jeffry, accompanying the same setting forth that the said Zephaniah Steelman now is and for some time past has been so far deprived of his reason and understanding that he is rendered altogether unfit and unable to govern himself or to manage his affairs and therefore praying that a commission de lunatico inquirendo may issue to inquire of the lunacy or idiocy of the said Zephaniah Steelman. It is ordered that a commission do issue accordingly directed to Richard W. Howell, Mahlon D. Canfield, and Jonathan D. Pitney Esq., who are hereby appointed commissioners for the purpose agreeable to the prayer of the said petitioner.

Dated July 11, 1837
Philemon Dickerson

In same case
Commission
Filed September 4, 1837

New Jersey. To wit. The state of New Jersey to Richard W Howell, Mahlon D. Canfield, and Jonathan Pitney, Greeting. Know ye that we have assigned any two of you to inquire by the oath an affirmation of good and lawful men of our county of Atlantic by whom the truth of the matter may be the better known whether Zephaniah Steelman of the township of Egg Harbor of the county of Atlantic is a lunatic or enjoys lucid intervals, so that he is not fit for the government of his lands tenements goods and chattels and if so from what time after what matter and how and if the said Zephaniah Steelman being in the said condition hath aliened any lands or tenements or not, and if so, what lands and what tenements, to what person or persons when where and after what manner, and how and what lands and d tenements and goods and chattels yet remain to him and to what person or persons as well the lands and tenements so alienated, as the land and tenements by him retained are held and after what manner and how much they are worth by

the year in all issues and who are his nearest heirs and of what ages and therefore we command you or any two of you at certain days and places which you shall for these purposes appoint diligently make inquisition in the premises and the same inquisition plainly made to us in the Court of Chancery under your seals and the seals of those persons by whom it shall be made without delay and send and this writ. For we command by the tenor of these presents that our sheriff of our county of Atlantic that at certain days and places which you shall make known to him be caused to come before you or any two of you so many and such good and lawful men of his county by whom the court of the matters may be better known and inquired into. In testimony whereof the seal of our Court of Chancery is hereunto affixed. Witness

Philemon Dickerson, Esq., Governor and Chancellor of Trenton this eleventh day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty seven 1837

E. B. Caldwell, sol. Stacy P. Potts (Clk)

The execution of this commission appears the inquisition hereto annexed.

Dated July 25, 1837 M. D. Canfield

Jonathan Pitney

In same case
Precept to summon jury
Filed September 4, 1837

State of New Jersey, Atlantic County: to the sheriff of our county of Gloucester authorized and directed to execute units and process in our said county of Atlantic, Greeting. By virtue of commission in the nature of a writ de lunatico inquiendo bearing date at Trenton on the eleventh day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven to us whose names are hereunto written directed to inquire if Zephaniah Steelman of the township of Egg Harbor and the county of Atlantic be a lunatic or not. There and therefore to will and require you to cause to come and appear before us twenty-four honest and lawful men of the county of Atlantic aforesaid on the twenty-fifth day of July 1837 at four o'clock in the afternoon of that day, at the house of William Westcoat in said county there and thereupon their oath to inquire of the lunacy of said Zephaniah Steelman and of all such matters and things that shall be given you

in a charge by virtue of said commissioners. And therefore fail not at your peril.

Given under our hands and seals this twenty-second day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven. 1837.

E. B. Caldwell, sol.

(signed) Rich W Howell
M D Canfield
Jonathan Pitney

The execution of this writ appears by the pannels hereby annexed.

Joseph Scull	Wesley Scull
Jacob Somers	David Campbell
Daniel Champion	Peter Steelman
Elisha E Hudson	Jeremiah Steelman
John Collins	Joshua Parwood
Constantine Somers	Peter Risley
Joseph Irelan	Daniel Steelman
Richard L Somers	Lamuel L Reed
Joseph Thompson	Japhet Townsend
Clark T Williams	Sheaman Clark
Richard Scull	Razine Steelmen
Hezekiah Shaw	J P Browning, Sheriff

In same case
Inquisition
Filed September 4 1837

Atlantic County. At an inquisition taken at the house of William Westcoat in the township of Hamilton in said on Tuesday the twenty-fifth day of July before Richard W Howel, Mahlon D Canfield and Jonathan Pitney Commissioners appointed by virtue of a writ – de lunatico inquiendo under the seal of the Court of Chancery of the State of New Jersey bearing date the eleventh day of July in the present year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven to them the said commissioners directed to inquire, among other things, of the lunacy of Zephaniah Steelman upon the oaths of Joseph Scull, Jacob Somers, Daniel Champion, Elisha E Hudson, John Collins, Constantine Somers, Joseph Ireland, Richard Somers, J Thompson, Clark Williams, Richard Scull, Hezekiah Shaw, David Campbell, Peter Steelman, Jeremiah Steelman, Joshua Parwood, Peter Risley, Daniel Steelman, Joseph Reed, Japhet Townsend, Sheaman Clark, Razine Steelmen, and Wesley Scull and the affirmation of Joshua Parwood, good honest and lawful men of said county who

being summoned being charged upon their oath and affirmation say that the said Zephaniah Steelman, at the time of taking this inquisition is a lunatic and of unsound mind and doth not enjoy lucid intervals, so that he is incapable of the government of himself, his messuages, lands, tenements, goods, and chattels and that he has been in the same state of lunacy from his infancy but how or by what means the said Zephaniah Steelman became lunatic the jurors aforesaid know not, unless by the visitation of God and the jurors aforesaid upon their oaths aforesaid do further say that the said Zephaniah Steelman is seized or entitled to the one tenth part of a certain tract of land, situate in the township of Eggharbor in the county of Atlantic, containing about one hundred and fifty acres in the whole – and the jurors aforesaid do further say that all the said lands are of the yearly value of one hundred dollars by the year.

And the jurors aforesaid do further say that the said Zephaniah Steelman hath not alienated any of his lands or tenements during his lunacy aforesaid to the knowledge of the said jurors.

And the jurors aforesaid do further say that the following debts and sums of money are due to the said Zephaniah Steelman, viz., one dollar

and ten cents from the estate of James Steelman, deceased, now in the names of Peter C. Steelman, admin. de bonis now of said deceased and also eighty-six dollars and ninety cents from Sybilla Steelman estate now in the hands of her administrators; that he hath likewise the sum of two hundred dollars now on deposit in the State Bank in Camden in this state.

And they further say that the said Zephaniah Steelman is possessed of the following articles of personal property, to wit, one bed and bedding, and one chest of the value of about thirty dollars.

And the jurors aforesaid do further say that the next relative of the said Zephaniah Steelman are the following brothers and sisters of the whole blood, viz., Peter C Steelman, aged about fifty-one years, Lerner Steelman aged about thirty five years, James Steelman aged about forty-one years, Jesse Steelman, aged about thirty-six years, Daniel Steelman aged about thirty-seven years, Washington Steelman, aged about thirty-two years, Hester Townsend, late Steelman, intermarried with Japhet Townsend, aged about forty-eight years,

Lottie Townsend (late Steelman) intermarried with James Townsend, aged about forty-three years, Sarah Adams (late Steelman) intermarried with Reubin Adams, aged about thirty years.

And the jurors aforesaid upon their oaths aforesaid do further say that the said Zephaniah Steelman doth not owe any debts as far as the said jurors can ascertain.

As witness whereof as well the said commissioners as the said jurors have hereunto set their hand and seals the day and year first above written. (signed): Richard W Howell, M. D. Canfield, Jonathan Pitney, Westly Scull, Joseph Scull, David Campbell, Jacob Somers, Peter S. Steelman, Daniel Champion, Jeremiah Steelman, Joshua Garwood, Peter Risley (his mark), Daniel Steelman, Joseph S. Reed, Japhet Townsend, Sheaman Clark, Brasher Steelman, Elisha E. Hudson, Constantine Somers, Joseph Irelan, Richard L. Somers, Joseph Thompson, Clark T. Williams, Rashene Steelman, Hezekiah Shaw.

In same case
Final Decree
Filed September 16, 1837

Upon opening this matter this fifteenth day of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven by Elias Caldwell, solicitor of the petition. It is shown that the commission awarded into this case hath been duly returned with the inquisition thereto annexed and bearing date the twenty-fifth day of July in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty seven by which the jurors who have passed upon that inquiry have found that the said Zephaniah Steelman at the time of taking the said inquisition was a lunatic and of an unsound mind, not enjoying lucid intervals and that he is incapable of the government of himself, his messuages, lands, etc. and that he hath been in the same state of lunacy from his infancy and that the said Zephaniah Steelman is of the age of forty-five years and that the said Zephaniah Steelman is seized or entitled to the one equal undivided tenth part of a certain tract of land situate in the township of Eggharbor in

the county of Atlantic containing about one hundred and fifty acres and that the said lands are of the yearly value of one hundred dollars and that the said Zephaniah Steelman is worth about two hundred and eighty-eight dollars in debts and money and that he owns sundry articles of furniture, viz., a bed and bedding and one chest of the value of about thirty dollars. It is therefore on this fifteenth day of September in the year aforesaid by Philemon Dickerson Esquire governor and chancellor of the state aforesaid ordered and adjudged and decreed that the said inquisitions and proceedings be in all things confirmed and affirmed of record and that the clerk of this court transmit to the Orphans Court of the county of Atlantic a certified copy of all the proceedings in this case agreeably to the act of legislature in such case made and provided.

Ph. Dickerson, Clk.

I Stacy G Potts, Clerk of the Court of Chancery of New Jersey do hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of all the proceedings lead in the said court. In the case of the lunacy of Zephaniah Steelman, from the original record remaining in my said office. In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the seal of the said Court of Chancery at Trenton the seventeenth day of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven.

Stacy Potts, Clk.

Atlantic Orphan Court
October term 1837
in petition, etc.

In matter of lunacy of Zephaniah Steelman of Egg Harbor Township in the County of Atlantic.

Whereas by certain proceedings had in the Court of Chancery of the State of New Jersey a certified copy of which hath been transmitted by the chancellor to the Orphan Court of the County of Atlantic and received and filed in the Surrogates office of said county. Zephaniah Steelman of the township of Egg Harbor in said county is found to be a lunatic and incapable of the government of himself, his messuages, lands, tenements, goods and chattels; and whereas proper application had been made to the court to appoint a guardian or guardians who shall have the care and provide for the safe keeping of the said Zephaniah Steelman a lunatic his lands, tenements, goods and chattels according to law. Whereupon the court do appoint David Frambus of the township of Egg Harbor in the county of Atlantic aforesaid Guardian of the

said Zephaniah Steelman a lunatic who shall have the care and provide for the safe keeping of the said Zephaniah Steelman his lands and tenements goods and chattels according to law. It is also further ordered and decreed that the said David Frambus.

Before he enters upon the duties of the appointment give bonds to the governor of this state and his successors in office with two of more sureties being freeholders appointed of by this court in the sum of one thousand dollars conditioned for the faithful performance of his duties as guardian according to law.

Done in open court
October 16th 1837
At Mays Landing

Joseph Garwood
Lewis M. Walker
Joseph Endicott
Jesse A. Bowen

The court ordered that the crier be paid by the court of common pleas for the days he attended upon the Orphans Court until such times as the fees shall amount to recompence.

I, Julius S. Taylor Clerk of the Orphans Court in and for the County of Atlantic do certify the foregoing to be a true record of all decrees and other matters passed upon by the judges and ordered to be recorded held at Mays Landing on Monday the sixteenth of October in the year of our lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-seven.

Witness my hand, etc.

Julius S. Taylor Clk.

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